



# United States Department of the Interior



## FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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From: State Supervisor

Subject: Working with Private Ranchers and Local Communities to Conserve Greater Sage-Grouse

### Introduction

One of the top goals identified in the March 16, 2012, Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office's (OFWO) priorities memorandum was to work in positive manner with Oregon's ranching community to conserve greater sage-grouse. The purpose of this memorandum is to clarify the OFWO perspective on the relationship between livestock grazing and the conservation of sagebrush ecosystems on private lands in Oregon. This document provides more specific guidance to OFWO staff as they carry out their conservation mission in this area, including the development and implementation of Candidate Conservation Agreements/with Assurances (CCAs/CCAAs), Partners for Fish and Wildlife program projects, and other activities and technical assistance.

I first provide a short overview of the latest scientific understanding of the effects of livestock grazing on Oregon's sagebrush ecosystems. I then provide other considerations that we must evaluate in conjunction with this science as we develop agreements and sagebrush conservation strategies that will result in optimal conservation outcomes. Many of you have already been working in the manner described below for many years, and this memorandum simply affirms and supports your approach and communicates it to others.

### Background

The mission of the Service is, "working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." One of our challenges, consistent with this mission, is to identify or help improve land use practices that are compatible with the conservation of the greater sage-grouse. For those practices that have negative impacts, we want to identify ways to moderate these impacts such that they are

compatible with the species' conservation and the economic, recreational, or other appropriate uses of these habitat areas.

Researchers have documented both positive and negative effects of livestock grazing on western grouse species and their habitats (Beck and Mitchell 2000; Davies et al. 2011; Pyke 2011; Boyd et al. 2014a,b; Chambers et al. 2014a,b). However, there are conflicting opinions about the respective magnitude of the positive and negative impacts on sagebrush systems (e.g., Beschta et al. 2013, Svejcar et al. 2014), especially when comparing historic grazing versus current practices.

There is clear scientific documentation that historic grazing of non-native ungulates has greatly altered sagebrush ecosystems during the previous 150 years and affected sage-grouse habitat conditions. Many of the grazing-associated problems we face today are a legacy of these past impacts. Grazing of various intensities can degrade habitat conditions and exacerbate sage-grouse nest predation and nest abandonment; modify vegetation structure and plant species composition in ways that decrease food and cover; increase the spread of nonnative plant species; and aggravate fire conditions (Reisner et al. 2013; Boyd et al. 2014a,b; Chambers et al. 2014a,b). Although less pressing than several other widespread threats, improper grazing was cited as a threat to sage-grouse in many parts of the range in the Service's Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report.

On the positive side, grazing can improve habitat and food conditions in certain habitats, at certain times, and under certain conditions. For example, it can reduce excessive shrub cover conditions for sage-grouse; increase habitat heterogeneity; improve stand establishment of some desirable woody species, and reduce fine fuels and some fire risk (Strand et al. 2008; Davies et al. 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014; Boyd et al. 2011; Strand and Launchbaugh 2013; Chambers et al. 2014a; Sheley et al. 2014). As most of you know, there is little that is black and white in this area -- there is tremendous complexity in interpreting this information and deciding where and how to apply different types of management under varied conditions (Boyd and Svejcar 2009).

Taking this complexity into account, this scientific information forms the foundation for our decisions and recommendations regarding sage-grouse conservation. However, another important consideration that also informs our decisions is the potential positive and negative impacts of our policies on the land management decisions of private landowners. This includes effects on the economic and social stability of ranching communities, and the subsequent effect these impacts might have on decisions made by landowners regarding conservation of fish and wildlife on their working rangelands.

It is good for conservation in Oregon to have healthy, economically stable private rangelands. In many places, functioning livestock ranches provide good wildlife habitat and often maintain many basic ecological processes on these landscapes (Davies et al. 2011). In contrast, unsuccessful ranches are often sold, developed, broken up into smaller land parcels, or converted to other uses (Brunson and Huntsinger 2008). Also, intact rural communities provide local services, expertise and infrastructure to help address important landscape level conservation challenges, such as suppressing undesirable wildfire, treating exotic species invasions, and

monitoring local field conditions (Murphy et al. 2013, Davies et al. 2014). Loss or decline of these local communities can make meeting these challenges more difficult.

Last, but no less important, is the Service's ability to maintain and improve positive working relationships with private landowners that better enables longterm conservation. Recent research has documented the disproportionately high value of privately-owned lands in the Great Basin to wildlife such as sage-grouse. This is especially true for summering habitat such as natural and farmed wet meadows used by sage-grouse broods on private lands (Donnelly et al. unpublished data).

Unfortunately, many landowners view ESA-listed species on their property as a financial and legal liability (Jackson-Smith et al. 2005; Paulich 2010; Sorice et al. 2011, 2013) and are sometimes discouraged from working collaboratively on conservation (Baur et al. 2009). Although many of these same landowners have a strong land stewardship ethic that often results in positive conservation, these values sometimes conflict with perceived legal or financial liabilities posed by environmental regulation (Olive and Raymond 2010, Mir and Dick 2012). As a result, some landowners may actively or passively resist maintaining or improving habitat conditions on their property to protect their longterm financial or legal interests.

An important role for the Service, then, is to find ways to reduce or eliminate this real or perceived conflict so that more conservation occurs on private lands. We accomplish this by developing relationships with these landowners and their representative organizations (e.g., Oregon Farm Bureau, Oregon Cattlemen's Association, etc.), understanding their concerns and operational constraints, and addressing financial and legal disincentives for species conservation. We also need to understand how these ranches use neighboring public lands and the extent to which some of these private operations depend on public rangelands to maintain an economically viable ranch. We do not just sign individual agreements or provide technical advice; we develop collaborative strategies that provide for long term conservation while enabling basic economic goals to be met. This approach will increase the likelihood of landowners actively allowing or implementing conservation on their private lands (Brook et al. 2003, Henderson et al. 2014). Sometimes these strategies must accept some localized negative impacts to sage-grouse while encouraging broader or longer term beneficial practices that outweigh these short term impacts. Evaluating these tradeoffs is rarely a simple or straightforward exercise, but it is one that must be done to achieve durable and broader conservation outcomes.

### OFWO Policy Perspective

The following list summarizes the OFWO perspective on livestock grazing and how the OFWO will proceed on working with private rangeland owners to conserve sage-grouse.

1. Historic grazing has had negative impacts on sagebrush ecosystems in many parts of Oregon.
2. Poorly managed grazing will continue to degrade ecosystems and exacerbate existing negative conditions for sagebrush and sage-grouse.
3. In many areas of Oregon, well managed grazing practices can improve habitat conditions or minimize future negative declines.

4. Well managed grazing practices can be compatible with long term sage-grouse conservation; these practices need to be better defined, scientifically evaluated, and strategically applied as CCAs/CCAAs and BLM RMPs are implemented.
5. Working with agency staff and local range scientists, private range managers and landowners can provide important information, expertise, and capacity to help monitor and improve local range conditions on both private and public lands.
6. Private rangelands provide important open space, habitat, and ecological processes for conserving sagebrush ecosystems. They are critically important components of sage-grouse habitat in Oregon, especially wet meadows.
7. The OFWO will work with landowners to improve habitat conditions wherever possible. Even if well managed grazing practices result in some local adverse impacts to sage-grouse, the Service will weigh these impacts in the context of achieving broader sagebrush conservation goals on private lands and a landscape scale.
8. The OFWO will actively add to the knowledge base on appropriate sage-grouse management.
9. Maintaining healthy, viable, locally managed private rangelands and ranching operations is integral to achieving sage-grouse conservation in Oregon for the reasons described above.

### Conclusion

The take home message from this memorandum is that conserving sage-grouse in the face of multiple threats is no easy task, and it will take successful collaboration with local communities to meet this goal. One cause for optimism is that many stakeholders with different perspectives are coming together on some key issues and discovering the issues on which they agree outnumber those about which they disagree. For example, most of us agree that fire and invasive species are the largest threats to sage-grouse in the Great Basin. We also agree that we want to improve the conservation of private lands and the economic well-being of rural communities. Community health is directly tied to maintaining undeveloped open landscapes where actions such as wildfire management and restoration can be applied, and private lands have some of the most important sage-grouse habitat. If we continue to focus on these and other areas of agreement, I believe we have a good chance at stabilizing and maintaining viable populations of sage-grouse through much of their historic range in Oregon in a way that is sensitive to local community goals.

Thank you for applying this vision in your area of jurisdiction, and please feel free to discuss this perspective with me at any time.

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